Dry Stone Construction

Inscribed on Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2019

Dry Stone Construction - Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage (chg.gov.ie)

Dry stone construction is the practice of building using only stone without any mortar. Stones are taken as found and placed together in a way that they are capable of forming strong stable and durable walls. Dry stone structures include walls, bridges, arches, tombs, beehive huts, oratories and fortifications. The craft is often seen as an innate skill passed through generations. Practitioners range from farmers, masons and sculptors. It is a vernacular craft.

Background information

It began with the dry stone wall. Simple boundaries then led to the evolution of the corbelled arch, used in the magnificent Passage Tombs. Dry stone construction was an integral part of early Irish cultural evolution and emergence of our identity as a people on this island. The practice of dry stone building can be traced back to the early Neolithic period here. These dry stone field systems are amongst the oldest in the world. Dry stone walling and construction are synonymous with the evolution of Irish culture and heritage. Dry stone walls and buildings created sheltered spaces to live, keep animals and grow crops. They facilitated non-

subsistence activities. Stone walls, as boundaries, in prehistory and historically were recognised assembly locations allowing the development of community or communal feasting activities such as games and trade.

The Irish Meitheal was a social and educational intergenerational activity used for achieving large stone tasks. The Meitheal builds on the value of co-operative labour within communities. Contemporary Meitheal groups are working in the preservation and promotion of dry stone structures, for example, Burren Beo, Mountain Meitheal Ireland and Mountcharles Community Group who have under taken both the promotion of and repair of their historic walls.

Stone, in the Irish consciousness, is associated with permanence and timelessness. So stone has become the perceived appropriate material to honour our dead, create safe spaces to live and sacred spaces to celebrate. Field walls lead to the Court tombs and Passage Tombs in the Stone Age. In the Bronze Age Beehive Huts, Wedge Tombs and Dolmens were constructed. During the Iron Age the great dry stone forts like Staigue, Lough A Dun, Doon Mor and Doon Beg were built. When Christianity came to Ireland many early monastic sites were dry stone buildings like Skellig Michael or Gallarus Oratory. Dry stone building in Ireland has always been part of the farming community, and during the 19th century most of the network of field walls we now see on Ireland's landscape were built, many of them commissioned by landlords for farmers and wallers to build during the changes in ownership or times of famine here. The craft has been passed on through the action of watching and doing together.

All these dry stone structures are synonymous with Irish culture and are recognised all over the world: Newgrange, Doonbeg, Gallarus Oratory, Poulnabrone Wedge Tomb, or Skellig Michael.

Dry stone building and Irish cultural heritage are inseparable.

Practice and practitioners

Key practitioners include farmers, landowners, professionals and communities, rural enterprise organisations, regional and government organisations, DSWAI and international stonecraft associations and organisations.

Practices of dry stone building vary throughout the island from single granite boulder walls of Connemara and Donegal, Feidin walls of the Aran Islands, South and East Galway, the wedged walls found as ditches, harbour and estuary walls throughout the country, especially southwest Munster, as well as consumption walls or the distinctive ‘Carlow fence’. The underlying geology, and hence the material dictate often the style of wall along with the individual’s own way of doing.

Currently, the craft is resurgent through the farming profession. Schemes support farmers financially and practically, e.g. Glas, NOTS Farm Wall Workshops.

In 2009, The Dry Stone Wall Association of Ireland was established to promote the significance of Ireland’s dry stone building heritage and practice. DSWAI workshops and events share the craft raising awareness of it as a living and vibrant part of Irish contemporary crafts.

Dry stone walling is a traditional skill offered by training centres at national, regional and local level, e.g. Office of Public Works, Education and Training Boards (ETBs). A growing number of professional practitioners also offer a range of services from building to conservation.

In 2007, The Féile na gCloch on Inis Oirr was the only dry stone festival; in 2018 there were 6 such events throughout the country.

Development, transmission and safeguarding

Traditionally, dry stone walling was the remit of the farmer and the community and was an integral part of working within the landscape and climate of the environment these rural peoples occupied. Passed from generation to generation through the acts of watching and "doing together" it was both a solitary *and* group activity. Farmers maintained breaches in their walls and ditches, safeguarding, stock-proofing and for crop cultivation and maintaining biodiversity. Community groups would assist one another with the clearance of stone from fields on a larger scale whereby the cultural activity of walling together facilitated what we now call community development or enhancement.

Presently, the craft is experiencing resurgence in interest from community groups and individuals. The value of keeping the craft alive within the population is appreciated by those within the farming sector, members of DSWAI as well as many stone craft and heritage professionals in Ireland.

The value of (and opportunity to sample) the craft realised through the availability training courses and workshops run by the ETBs and the DSWAI and supported by local authorities, community development groups, skills development groups and others has been realised in recent years.

Communities in rural Ireland have established festivals and events that engage in dry stone walling drawing in tourists and visitors to join local wallers in sharing the sense of achievement that it to be gained from “group making”.

Dry stone landscapes can fall between the protection offered by legislative or environmental policies like the National Monument Acts 1930-2004 and the Planning Acts or Special Areas of Conservation and despite their obvious cultural and heritage value they remain vulnerable to modern cultural and farming practices.

As a response to this perceived vacuum, the DSWAI and others have attempted to raise the awareness and ability of the custodians of the craft to actively engage with the practice and preservation of it.

Supporting farmers is vital. DSWAI has assisted farmers in Donegal, Sligo, Tipperary and Wicklow by offering the opportunity to “do together” and so empowering the custodians of many of our dry stone walls to actively maintain them.

The DSWAI has built an informative website to provide information on the craft and its history, heritage, best practice and opportunities within the profession. Studies like the two volume inventory Europe’s Field Boundaries (Georg Mueller 2013) and Pat McAfee’s seminal works on dry stone walls and dry stone building (as well as his contribution as a teacher over the past 30 years) only highlight the significance of Ireland’s dry stone built heritage and the cultural practice that it represents when you review the statistical evidence presented there. Ireland has approximately 400,000km of field walls and 210,000km of stone faced banks alone (Mueller 2013) making it the leading country of the 26 surveyed by Mueller.

DSWAI Mentoring - YouTube

Other legislation offers indirect protection to dry stone landscapes are the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), The European Landscape Convention and European Union member state “cross-compliance”.